



All Systems Connect

Uniting experts and activists to
address the challenges of
water and health



asc23

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This briefing note draws together the key insights and calls to action from the All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023, World Forum, The Hague, The Netherlands, 2-4 May 2023.

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All Systems Connect

Uniting experts and activists to address the challenges of water and health

Background

Water, sanitation, and hygiene – or WASH – are critical for ensuring health and well-being, and therefore must be included in strategies to strengthen the health system. WASH forms the basis of a strong public health system, preventing the spread of illnesses and keeping the population healthy and out of the medical system; there are direct linkages between poor WASH and the transmission of variety of health issues including diarrhoeal diseases and neglected tropical diseases. Achieving universal health coverage, building the basis of primary health care, improving the quality of care and ensuring adequate infection prevention and control cannot be achieved without WASH services.

The effects of climate change on WASH systems only exacerbate the problem, reversing progress and further threatening human health.

Despite the clear relationship between the two, WASH and global health are viewed into separate sectors, each with unique expertise and specific objectives. To bring these sectors into greater alignment, three primary entry points have been identified where WASH plays a critical role including:

- 1) Robust, high-quality health systems.
- 2) Disease prevention.
- 3) Climate-resiliency.

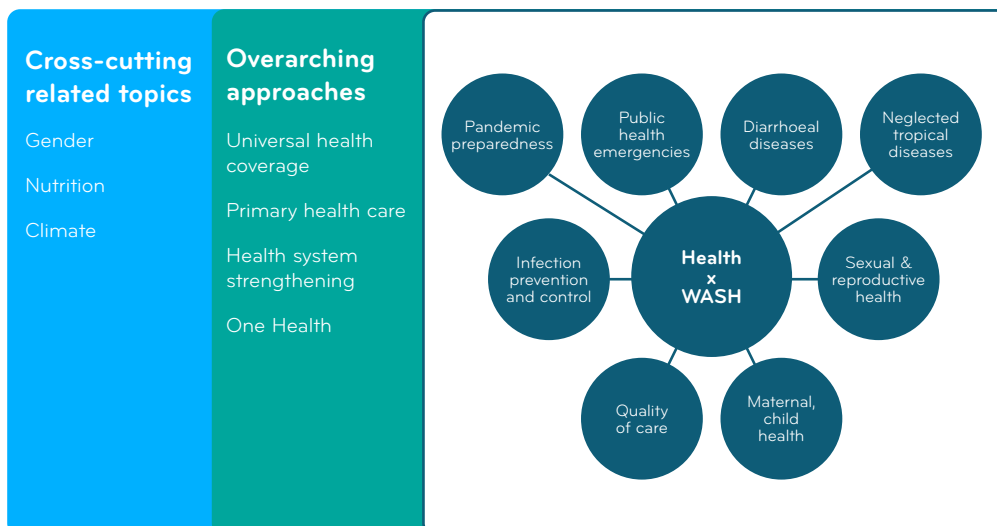


Figure 1: WASH systems and health sector nexus



"Health systems themselves must prepare to connect with WASH. And one of the things we need to do is to change the narrative, how we describe WASH in healthcare facilities. I don't think it should be WASH in healthcare facilities. It should be WASH in healthcare settings because that's actually what we do.

In health WASH is health. We don't see it as WASH. We see it as health because really **it is very central to make sure we have health.**"

– Dr Mary Ashinyo

Quality Lead and Deputy Director,
Institutional Care Directorate,
Ghana Health Service

All Systems Connect Symposium

In May 2023, the All Systems Connect Symposium (ASC) brought together experts, activists, and decision makers to think and act differently in our pursuit of delivering safe and sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene services. We know that despite having shared goals, WASH and global health activities operate largely independently of one another, with separate strategies, policies, budgets, and programmes. The Connect-Health programme at ASC aimed to bridge this divide and champion shared solutions that contribute to better health outcomes.

During the event, Connect-Health sessions explored the key entry points for aligning the WASH and health sectors. In addition, the sessions considered health system strengthening vs. disease-vertical programming (organised by specific diseases such as malaria or HIV), as well as other areas of intersection, such as gender. Experts from the health sector, including Ministries of Health and healthcare workers, contributed to discussions on how to partner and which issues were top priorities for them – such as primary health care and infection prevention and control.

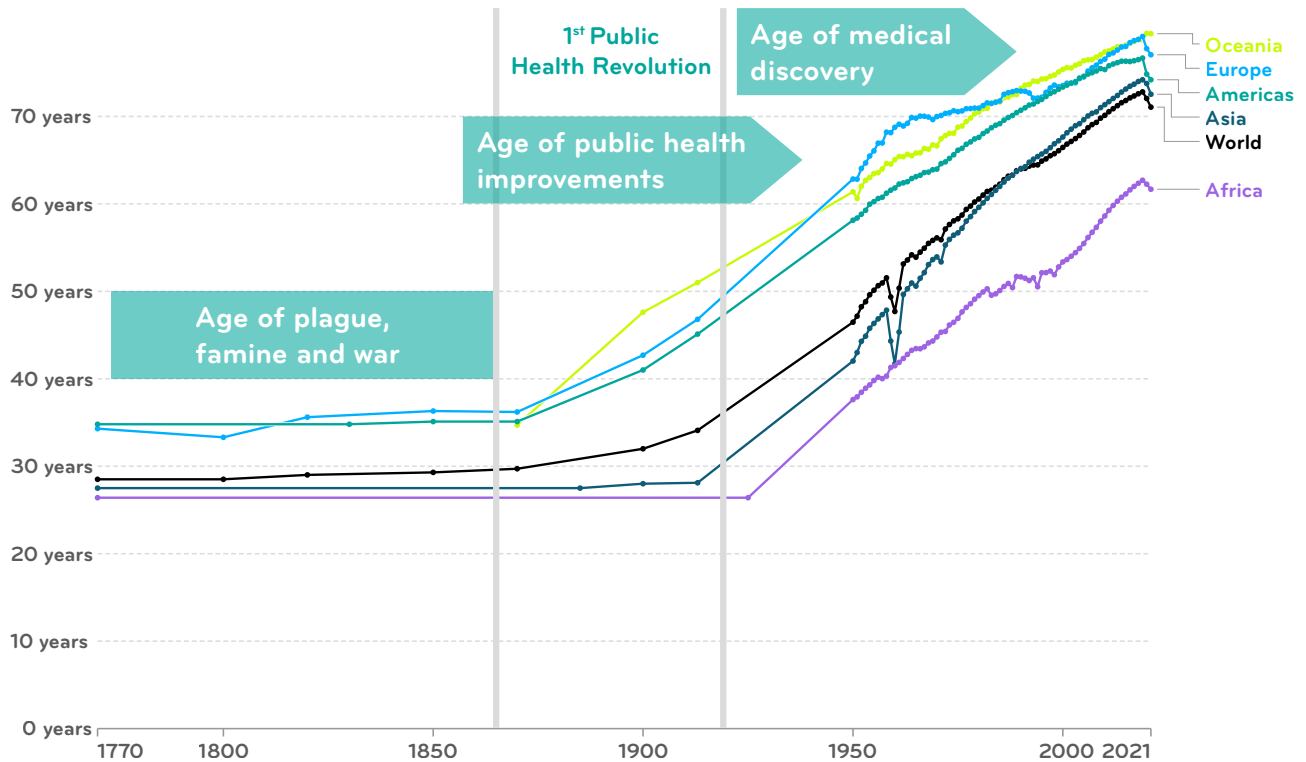
The sessions articulated barriers inhibiting greater alignment between WASH and health that result in neglect of WASH in health agendas:

- Lack of clarity around what a WASH-for-Health agenda should look like, including the definition of success.
- Insufficient representation of WASH in global health communities.
- Lack of support and funding for WASH as a key disease prevention measure, and separate funding streams for WASH and health, solidifying the silos.
- Poor communication around opportunities to work together.
- Lack of mutual accountability for WASH as it relates to health.

Throughout the symposium, participants referred to this work as a “WASH-for-Health” approach, which views water, sanitation, and hygiene from the perspective of their impact on public health. This is different from a simple exploration of common agendas and allies between WASH and health, or an effort to mobilise health systems actors to prioritise WASH.

Life expectancy

The period life expectancy¹ at birth, in a given year.



1. Period life expectancy is a metric that summarizes death rates across all age groups in one particular year. For a given year, it represents the average lifespan for a hypothetical group of people, if they experienced the same age-specific death rates throughout their whole lives as the age-specific death rates seen in that particular year.

Adapted from Our World In Data. Data source: UN WPP (2022); HMD (2023); Zijdeman et al. (2015); Riley (2005)

Figure 2: When it comes to improving life expectancy, public health—with water, sanitation and hygiene at its core—has always been ahead of medicine. Graph presented by Dr. Githinji Gitahi at ASC.

In a fully executed WASH-for-Health agenda, cross-sectoral collaboration supports regular information sharing, technical support and input, joint programming and monitoring, and shared messaging to address critical health and development needs that are impacted by water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

Participants of the Connect-Health programme, supported by the symposium advisory council, indicated an appetite for a Global Action Agenda on WASH-for-Health, which would elevate the role

of WASH services in achieving SDG3 – health and well-being for all. Action items discussed included:

- Identify coordination mechanisms between health and WASH stakeholders at the national level, agreeing upon roles and responsibilities and common objectives.
- Advocate jointly for water, sanitation, and hygiene as a driver of public health within existing global health initiatives (e.g., One Health, Planetary Health, Primary Health Care); and at the highest levels of government and funders.

- Collaborate with health advocates to draft a cabinet-level memo that Ministries of Health can adapt to create buy-in and ownership of WASH with other ministries.
- Integrate WASH data into existing health management information systems.
- Include water, sanitation and hygiene in key global health events and ensure achievable calls to action.

The Connect-Health sessions fed into a larger dialogue about systems leadership, which recognises that people and behaviour are central to driving change. Systems leaders can be found, and supported, at any level across the systems that provide critical services like WASH and health.

They are able to see and understand the system, while building up leadership action and mobilising others to work towards a common goal. In addition to specific actions relating to WASH-for-Health that emerged from the event, the wider symposium agreed that a key action is to continue improving our understanding of systems strengthening and systems leadership, to identify these systems leaders, and to step into our role as systems leaders, wherever we are in the system.

The key actions from Connect-Health and the wider All Systems Connect programme are elaborated in the All Systems Connect communiqué.

“Investments in water and sanitation are HEALTH investments.”

– **Dr. Githinji Gitahi**
Group CEO
Amref Health Africa





Looking ahead: 2024 and beyond

We launched our Connect-Health Strategy, which seeks to ensure the prioritisation of water, sanitation, and hygiene services in global, regional, and national efforts to improve human health and well-being, thereby preventing death and illness from unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene. Connect-Health takes IRC's existing work body of work related to health and strengthens it by engaging more intentionally with the health sector.

To operationalise this strategy, IRC has identified three primary areas of work, which will be implemented through advocacy, technical advisory, and research and learning:

1. Develop and strengthen relationships with the health sector, identifying allies and partners for WASH-for-Health.

2. Champion greater alignment and integration between the health and WASH sector in support of SDG3 (health and well-being for all) and sustainable development more generally.

3. Promote increased investment in WASH as a necessary means to improve human health and well-being, both by governments and external partners.

Above all else, IRC's strategy prioritises allyship to shepherd these efforts forward. The Connect-Health strategy relies on strong relationships with WASH and health sector systems leaders, as well as those from other sectors - climate, finance, social justice and beyond - to achieve mutually supportive goals.



IRC is an international think tank actively building strong water, sanitation, and hygiene systems – from the bottom up and the top down. We exist to support countries to build strong local and national services, underpinned by resilient systems, that transform lives and build equity, justice, and opportunity for all.

Achieving and sustaining universal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene for all requires connecting with changemakers in health, climate, and social justice. As with many of the Sustainable Development Goals, an integrated, multi-sectoral approach will be needed to drive systems change.

In view of this, we have developed the Connect initiative to strengthen our strategic engagement beyond the water, sanitation, and hygiene sectors. This note introduces our strategic framing for Connect-Health. It draws upon our experience working with health sector partners, as well as the many conversations sparked during the All Systems Connect Symposium. We welcome others to join us in this effort, as we move towards a collective WASH-for-health action agenda.



About the author

Lindsay Denny is a WASH Programme Specialist at UNICEF, with a decade of experience in WASH and global health. Lindsay has worked at the nexus of WASH and health from a variety of vantage points, including research, advocacy, education, and implementation. Formerly based in the Philippines and Cambodia, she has provided support to countries across the world to improve WASH conditions in their healthcare facilities, including through roles at Emory University, as well as various UN agencies and NGOs.

Lindsay graduated from the University of California, San Diego with a degree in Physiology & Neuroscience and completed her Master of Public Health at Boston University, with a focus on International Health and Infectious and Non-Communicable Diseases.



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